

FIELDWORK NOTES

Emil Antonov, PhD candidate
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic
Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,
Chairman of the Bulgarian Association of Music Therapy
[kanas_iuvigi@abv.bg]

Traditional Medicinal Rituals from Mexico Coming to Bulgaria: The Trip of Huichol People

Abstract: *This paper presents in detail the visits of several Mexican Huichol (Wixárika) shamans and their apprentices to Bulgaria between 2014 and 2018. Most of these visits took place in different villages across the country in the form of gatherings (some of which the author personally observed) with Bulgarians interested in exotic spiritual practices. The Wixárika tradition thus appeared for the first time in Bulgaria and, allegedly, on the Balkan peninsula, with all its ritual paraphernalia – amulets, sacred objects, and the spirit of their sacred chanting as well.*

Against this background, the paper examines how these centuries-old healing rituals from a non-European culture were carried out in a contemporary European context, considering that these shamans were based in Switzerland and have traveled across Western Europe before coming to Bulgaria. In addition, the process of internationalization, globalization and commercialization of these rituals, including the participation of non-indigenous shamans and apprentices alike, is also discussed. Finally, the paper considers the possibility of a dialogue between the Bulgarian Christian tradition and the pagan rituals of the Huichol people.

Keywords: *rituals; medicinal practices; Huichol; shamanism; medicine-man.*

This text draws on my personal participation in and observation of Wixárika (Huichol) healing rituals as practiced in Bulgaria between 2014 and 2018, exploring the themes of authenticity and adaptation in the healing narratives of both ritual leaders and Bulgarian participants. The analysis is also based on interviews with both groups, representing an auto-ethnographic approach to the exploration of traditional medical rituals. This research addresses a little-known case in Bulgaria and raises important questions about the authenticity of ‘Native American

practices' and cultural transformation, such as whether the rituals presented as "traditional" are genuinely so or have been influenced by modern, European, or global trends. Also noted are competitive dynamics and the commercialization of the shamanic scene in Bulgaria. The study offers a description of the ceremonies of the Wixárika (Huichol) people as practiced among Bulgarian participants. One of the aims is to show the interaction and cultural exchange between representatives of individual religious movements and beliefs, who manage to combine and create, at least temporarily, a hybrid form that carries elements of both Christian tradition and pagan ritual. Last but not least, attention has been paid to the adaptation and dissemination of all these practices in Bulgaria.

For the purposes of the research, I draw on my personal impressions from participation, as well as information taken from semi-structured interviews with participants in the ceremonies. Also, some notes and ideas from free conversation during the gatherings are mentioned in the text. I consider myself a researcher conducting participant observation, but my prior personal and professional interest and background experience in distant Eastern spiritual and ritual practices (Zen, Japanese martial arts, Chi-gong, Yoga, Buddhist practices, etc.) may have shaped my personal engagement, ideas regarding my own participation, description and subsequent analysis. This research therefore offers one perspective on processes unfolding in recent decades not only in Bulgaria, but also in Europe more broadly.

Due to ethical considerations and standards, all respondents are referred to by initials, with anonymization or pseudonymization strategies used within the framework of informed consent. Only the names of the main shamans and priests are retained in full as they are public figures known in and outside their communities. This distinction reflects implicit differences between these two groups, based on the uneven 'power dynamics' between leaders and followers, teachers and students, natives and newcomers, "sellers" and "consumers", etc.

The Huichol people (Wixárika, or Wixáritari as well) are known as an ethnic group in contemporary Mexico, located in the states of Nayarit, Jalisco, Durango and Zacatecas – municipalities in the extreme south of the West Sierra Madre. Their population, whose native language is Wixarika/Wixaritari waniuki, numbers 61,000 (2025 data). They practice shamanism, but also Catholicism. The Wixárika are sometimes seen, even in Mexico, as overly conservative and detached from modern life, representatives of a culture in which the distinction

between science, magic and religion is blurred. Fragments of Wixárika culture (rituals and healing practices), were brought to Bulgaria by members of this group living outside their homeland, in Europe (Switzerland), where they had migrated for economic reasons years ago. This raises the question of how much of what is presented as traditional is genuinely so, and whether, at the beginning of the XXI century, these practices have been influenced or transformed by the European, modern or global contexts due to the transnational trajectories of migration and settlement outside Mexico.

The Huichol People in Bulgaria: a Personal Chronicle

The first meeting between Bulgarians and Huichol shamans took place in October 2014, in a house in a small village in Lovech District (north-central Bulgaria). There is some ambiguity about who first contacted the Huichol and who invited them to Bulgaria. From an interview with one participant in the ceremonies (V. G., b. 1982, economist, Sofia), it appears that he may have been among the first Bulgarians to do so, in pursuit of new “spirituality” and the “divine”. However, I do not exclude the possibility that he emphasized this role for reasons of self-promotion and prestige. At the time of the interview, he claimed to no longer be interested in “Indians”, preferring instead to look for his “roots” in the Balkans or Asia. Regarding this and other interviews, it is clear that critical reflection on the healing stories of participants in the ceremonies is always necessary – both of those who present and lead these traditional practices, and of those who engage with them in search of knowledge, help or for personal development – in order to achieve greater objectivity amid the many subjective accounts of people with different backgrounds.

A shaman called Don Andres and his apprentice/assistant Victor led¹ a ceremony representing the peyote² (the Huichol call this plant *abuelo*³). All participants in the first gathering were required to bring with them a long list of mostly personal small items (photos, fresh flowers, candles, coins, round mirror, holy water etc.) along with specific food and drinks to share. Many of these items were placed on a specially

¹ It is customary at these gatherings for everyone to address each other by their first name. Only the leaders are addressed with the respectful “Don” (Span.) before their names, but it means something more than just “Sir”.

² A species of North American cactus of the genus *Lophophora williamsii*, the word “peyote” is from the Nahuatl language, and in the Wixárika language the plant is called “jícuri”, “híkuri”.

³ Grandfather (Span.).

built altar (constructed on a large table, with an arc of three branches and flowers). An important detail is that at this first meeting, unlike in all subsequent ceremonies, there was no Indian tipi set up at the gathering site, which would have required more time and preparation. Right from the beginning, the peyote was referred to by the guests, and soon by everyone else, as “*medicina*”.⁴ The officially declared purpose of the gathering (later called a “ceremony” by the guests themselves), was explained from the Huichol perspective as opening the participants’ connection with the Spirit and revealing the divine essence of the Trinity (Deer-Princess-Peyote). This was the main task to which all participants in the circle were expected to adhere. Healing, it was explained, occurred through this connection with the Spirit. Later, during the ceremony itself, the guests also emphasized the importance of this connection with (and respect for) Pachamama.⁵ They explained that this connection would be drawn into the “inside of a circle” and that they “will adhere to this in all activities that are carried out”. An important detail to note is the presence of an interpreter (from Spanish) at all the meetings and ceremonies, which made this role essential to the process of communication.

The ceremony officially begins after sunset, but preparations start in the afternoon. At the very beginning of the rituals, peyote is distributed – the apprentice Victor places it in the mouth of each participant with a tablespoon. The instructions are that everyone may swallow as much as they want. After each spoonful, the participant drinks juice to help with swallowing. After several such “rounds”, the shaman and his assistant talk, occasionally sing, and the “Keeper of the fire” ensures that the flame does not go out. At times, the old shaman falls asleep, during which his apprentice takes over, speaking about the history and culture of his people. Prayers are offered to the “Supreme Power”, sometimes named “Pachamama”, invoked for health and fertility. This continues without pause until the morning when everyone greets the sunrise, and around 8-9 a.m. the ceremony is “closed” by the leaders, after which everyone goes to sleep. All the objects brought by the participants are used, each with a specific purpose, in rituals unfamiliar to the Bulgarians, yet performed trustingly under the instructions of the

⁴ *Medicina* (Span.) – medicine, cure, medication, solution, outcome.

⁵ Pachamama (Quechua: Pacha Mama) – the name given by the people of the Andes to a deity they worship, considered the personification of the Earth. In Inca mythology and religion, she is a “Mother Earth” type omnipresent goddess, linked to fertility, sowing and harvesting.

visitors from Mexico. This was the first such meeting on Bulgarian territory, marking the gradual and layered introduction of Huichol shamanism to a small circle of Bulgarians seeking healing, spirituality, or simply cultural contact.

My most vivid and transformative experience with the Huichol (Wixárika) people took place in the village of Rozovo (Central Bulgaria) in the summer of 2016, where both the ceremonial complexity and my personal involvement deepened significantly. This time the group was larger – around 30 Bulgarians gathered with a Huichol delegation of ten, including Don Andres, Victor, his wife, and their boy, /J., 8 years old/. With them is another family from South America with their son /M., 9 years old/ along with several apprentices from Europe, transforming these gatherings into more elaborate cultural exchanges. Both children played active symbolic roles during the rituals. This was no longer a simple overnight ceremony – it had evolved into something larger, more orchestrated, and more intense. Few hours before the ceremony, male apprentices paint arrows made in advance from sticks (short ritual arrows placed in the arch with flowers on the altar), while women string beads (men may help if necessary). In addition, dozens of amulets are prepared – small wooden figurines of people and other shapes. The Huichol explain that these serve to recreate the world in miniature as well as possible, so that the Spirit could bless it with health and prosperity when the connection is made during the ceremony. Another key element is the altar which always faces East, towards the rising sun. For foreigners, it was important so that everything had its place inside the circle.

At the very beginning of the ceremony, the shamans instruct everyone to take off their festive clothes and put them back on only at the end, the following morning. Otherwise, it was believed to insult the Spirit. The main figures are Don Andres, Victor and his wife, and they also appoint a “leader” among the Bulgarians – S. (b. 1986, an IT-specialist). Once chosen, the old shaman and his assistants begin to call him „*El Cura*“,⁶ or „*Chamaleon*“.⁷ His was a main “role” in the ceremony – S. is made to “play” the role of the one who heals, helps, all the time – a person with the abilities of a healer, and an intermediary between the participants and the Spirit. He is expected to walk around with a small wooden vessel filled with water all the time, which, Victor explains, hold all the power of the ceremony. Using a brush made of

⁶ Priest; treatment; cure; drunkenness (colloquial) (Span.).

⁷ Variant of the word used for chameleon (Span.).

deer hair, the “healer” sprinkles water first on the altar and then on the people.

Little boy M. plays the role of a young deer (or possibly a bull), adorned with two large bundles of bird feathers attached by a white-green cloth around his head. The night before, the child explained that for this ceremony he would take another, sacred name connected with the animal. Another guest, S., plays the role of “Keeper of the Fire”. The German member of the group (J. J., b. 1977), takes out a whistle that imitates the sound of a birdsong to “call” birds and to connect with their spirit. He explains that some of the feathers used are from a jay. Assistant shaman Victor says at this point: “The medicine goes directly to your heart. If your heart is made of stone – you won’t be able to feel anything! ... You must pray – each for himself... We never guarantee visions.” During the rituals, M. falls asleep in his chair. The old shaman rouses him with a shout, and Victor places into his hands an entire pile of candles to be set in prepared holders – bamboo tubes fixed to pegs in front of the altar, fourteen in total. Half-asleep, the boy staggers under their weight, clutching them in a red tower as if carrying a baby. His mother tells him: “You are working, you are not sleeping, and this is not a dream, act!” He is made to spin counterclockwise before attaching the candles haphazardly to the stands, guided by the shamans’ calls – particularly those of Don Andres. Later, the candles in front of the three leaders are also placed by the child and again after spinning. I interpret this as a cleansing of the space, connected to the sacrifice that was to follow. The ceremony usually continues until shortly after sunrise, but this time the meeting with the Huichols is different, divided into two parts, with the afternoon set aside for rest after the morning rituals.

This sacrifice had been arranged in advance with the Bulgarian organizers, who provided an animal purchased from a nearby cattle farm. Some of the participants leave as soon as they hear of these plans. The Huichols explain that the transition of the soul must happen harmoniously (on a spiritual level), so that the spirits (including those of the ancestors) could accept the soul of the sacrificial animal favorably and it may become one with them. Ancestors, in their social hierarchy, occupy the highest status. According to the shamans, the act of sacrifice will ensure health and well-being for those who participate in it.

The shaman and his assistants are cheerful and give instructions and distribute the roles so that the rite of passage happens smoothly and solemnly, and without surprises. The place is decorated with colourful cloths as if for a festivity, but also for a lavish funeral. The atmosphere

itself suggests joy and cheerfulness rather than sorrow and bloodshed. Each participant is carefully positioned around the center where the sacrifice will take place. The black animal is brought into an improvised tent (made of four carts and a canvas roof), then carried – since it refuses to walk – by M. (in the role of the “young deer”/ “bull calf”) and S. (as the “Priest”/ “treatment”) counterclockwise around a dug hole. The shamans’ instruct that six circles are made, but it looks to me there are nine – Don Andres is not counting very accurately. He enjoys watching them struggle to carry the animal, which, despite being small, is still large relative to the child. Then the shamans rearrange all those present in the space designated for the ritual in a seemingly symbolic pattern with no obvious logic to myself. They then take out a large knife with a wooden handle and a ball of very thick thread. Don Andres takes the ball and starts to untangle it, passing it to the person next to him – in this way the ball passes through all those present. At the end, they wrap it around everyone several times in an imaginary circle. This produces a strange tangle of many threads (coming from one ball), which seem endless and which connect everyone. While everyone stands and holds the threads, as if “hung” on this (one) thread, the shamans have S. grab the bull calf and walk it around the thread around everyone several times around the entire circle, finally bringing it back to the hole in the center. The Huichols explain that this is how they “mapped” the path of the animal’s soul after it left the body, so it doesn’t get lost but goes directly to the ancestors and merges with them.

The sacrifice itself is performed by the assistant shaman, Victor. The blood is left to flow into the hole in the ground. Victor puts a large piece of the animal’s flesh, which he cut off first, into a jar – apparently giving it ritual significance and planning to use it as medicine later. At the same time, M. collects as much of the flowing blood as he can in a plastic box. Then the child takes the container to the altar and smears everything there with the blood. All participants who want to are smeared with it – parts of their body or any of their items from the altar. The shamans stir the blood using a deer hair brush and sprinkle the participants with it. The Huichols’ explanation is that this brings health and prosperity since the blood from the sacrifice is sacred. Then J. J. and another participant take the animal by the legs and walk it nine times around the hole. Next, they take it to a place to the side of the tent, where they strip the skin. Everyone takes turns to throw coins into the hole containing the blood. Then the boy J. uses a shovel to bury the

coins and traces of the soaked blood in the ground. Later, the flesh is cooked into soup and dried meat.

Afterwards, Don Andres and Victor discussed something uttering a word that sounds like “hikaro” or “hikari” – apparently in the context of Huichol culture. A young man, N. who is sitting nearby – explains to me that it is about the Spirit of the Deer (the sacred manifestation of the Spirit), in his communication with the human’s world.⁸ Shamans speak of it as something that you can chase, catch and defeat, but with which you can and must always communicate. During their visits to Bulgaria, shamans always complete the cycle of ceremonies according to their own rules and criteria. Because of the particularities of their tradition, they invest their actions with meanings and emotions that an outside observer can hardly fully understand. It is likely that some of the more experienced Bulgarian participants are informed in advance of the Huichol’s intentions for organizational purposes. After conducting this series of ceremonies, the guests stay in Bulgaria for some time, traveling and seeking to hunt a deer.

One informer (G. A., b. 1983) also recounted that after the ceremony, on the way back from Rozovo, the bus carrying the guests had a flat tire, with even the bolts on its rim falling out. Don Andres explained that this was because the bull calf did not want to leave Bulgaria and had to stay here. This caused tensions among the group, but no meat from the sacrificial animal was taken out of the country. The Huichols work with the energy of the deer in every ceremony, and in their tales, the bull is the elder brother of the deer. From the meat of the sacrificed calf, the group cooked and ate the ears (to hear better), the eyes (to see better), but not the tail (the reason was not given). The ceremony then continued for another day.

G. A. describes Huichol culture as very “earthly and alive”, as well as “authentic”. What I experienced in Rozovo was not a reenactment or performance, but a living ritual, layered with tradition, symbolism, and raw emotion. For outsiders, roles were assigned not merely to participate but to act as mediators between two realities. Personally, I left with more questions than answers – yet also with a deeper recognition of how ritual can transform the self, bind communities, and make visible otherwise invisible and old traditions.

⁸ In fact, it is about *hicouri* or *jículi* (“the divine luminous one”) the Huichol call the peyot, <https://www.artemarakame.com/blogs/news/el-divino-luminoso-jicuri?srsltid=AfmBOopyiwCLBUkAf5GOhfJ4cs9iUuwHEQo5kOKGMNeiCiGZ-D4zV1oX>, (last visit 11.05.2025).

Before and after the Rozovo Gathering

The earlier ceremonies (2014-2015) were simpler – typically held in village houses or fields near Lovech. Peyote was the centerpiece, rituals lasted through the night, and healing practices using *muviere*⁹ (one of the most important sacred tools) were introduced. Over time, the gatherings grew more organized: the use of Indian tipi, the inclusion of children in symbolic roles, and a steady blending of Huichol ritual with local Bulgarian context. In one of the gatherings, the shamans recommend watching a short video – “Viaje Huichol”,¹⁰ to better understand their culture.

One recurring figure from the Lovech area, an old man named M. I., (everyone calls him “Bai”¹¹) has had several meetings and conversation with the foreigners. Bai M. even integrated his own version of evangelical-Christian “speaking in unknown languages” into these exchanges, creating unique moments of spiritual crossover. He is Orthodox, wears a cross around his neck, and is already well-known in the area: people come to his house to answer their questions. The old man often blesses them and offers healing – usually talking for hours without stopping and getting tired, frequently using phrases like “arabe”, “abra” and “kharabia”, while mixing them with quotations from the Bible learned by heart. After a long conversation (through the interpreter), he blesses the Huichol visitors too and gives them a cross, while they give him a beaded bracelet, explaining that it is a sacred object that carries much power.

In late 2016, I heard about another gathering with the same shamans, again near Lovech. A friend of mine, (L. B., b. 1979, archaeologist), attended in search of healing for his sister. He described an intense night – doubt, convulsions, and eventually reassurance. In the morning, Don Andres accepted a pullover from him to stay warm and casually mentioned he was returning to Mexico to meet with the “maracami”¹²

⁹ Muvieri (Span.) – a craft with deep religious symbolism. It consists of a bamboo arrow with feathers – from an eagle or falcon at one end, which are connected by a colored thread. It is used in different Wixárika ceremonies.

¹⁰ Animation 12:13 min. long, presenting key moments from Wixárika mythology, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgDbq8ur5gI>, (last visit: 05.05.2025).

¹¹ Elder brother, uncle, old man, gaffer, goodman (Bulg.).

¹² *Marakame* (Wixarika) is a person intermediary between the world of humans and spirits. It is also believed he is a person who seeks knowledge in order to interpret what is happening in the world. Also known as *masa'akame* it means a traditional Huichol therapist and/or doctor whose role goes beyond the healing sphere and is limited to social relations as a leader and continuer of the group's traditions.

– ancient, powerful shamans of the Wixárika. Later, L. B. began to suspect that his gift of clothing was also an energetic offering, a notion confirmed by others who had studied Huichol practice: such items are often exchanged as part of asking a question to the spirits. In 2017/18 the ceremonies continued, but in smaller, more private circles. Some Bulgarians even traveled to Switzerland to deepen their training with the Huichol. The process, I'm told, became more rigorous: financial pressure, secrecy, emotional strain. It was no longer just about spiritual seeking – it had become a commitment.

Don Andres (1915 – November, 2017; his family name remains unclear to me) died in Mexico, at the age of over 100 – some Bulgarians have seen his passport during his visits. At his first public meeting with Bulgarians, he was very cheerful, though he used crude language all the time. Even the interpreter was often embarrassed and did not translate everything. The old man had lived in Switzerland in recent years, but often traveled to Mexico. Victor (b. 1976) – a student and assistant of the old shaman, lives in Switzerland and works in construction. After the death of his teacher, he went to the keepers of the tradition in Mexico to discuss the future with the families who had previously “worked” with Don Andres.

The Period after 2018

Some informers say that the Huichols came at the end of July 2019 (a group of 18 persons). During their stay they performed again several rituals, toured Bulgaria, and held an “open” deer hunt in the Sredna Gora mountain – ‘open’ here is to mean it was for everyone interested, not just for the Huichols, their guide, or the Forestry Department officer. The 2019 visit of the Wixárika to Bulgaria was coordinated by a different person, a man with extensive experience in ceremonies, connected to the shaman Jose, who was already famous in Bulgaria. Since this change in the organization, I have not been able to follow these shaman visits.

Under the influence of ceremonies since late 2016, participants from the groups that attended Huichol gatherings have begun to organize their own meetings – workshops, ceremonies, and courses, offering “sacred” practices at more affordable prices, with a certain ritualism that affects/copies the traditions the Wixárika representatives had already introduced in Bulgaria.

After speaking with participants in the Wixárika (Huichol) ceremonies in Bulgaria, most of them Christians, I can note that these events

are part of a wider trend: a growing number of Native American-inspired rituals and gatherings have been taking place across Bulgaria – often independently, yet shaped by similar cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors. Traditional practices from Latin America have found new audiences in Europe, often through traveling shamans seeking followers, healing-seekers, or financial opportunities. Many Bulgarians who later attended Huichol events had already participated earlier in ceremonies involving ayahuasca, peyote, etc. The emergence of Huichol ceremonies in Bulgaria fits into a broader landscape of imported indigenous practices shaped by global exchange, spiritual tourism, and the shifting boundaries between healing, belief, and business.

In Conclusion

The Huichol ceremonies in Bulgaria reflect a complex interplay of cultural exchange, spirituality, and commodification, where healing is viewed differently by Huichol shamans and participants. While the Huichols see healing as a secondary outcome of a deeper spiritual connection – “a result” of a deeper spiritual process, rooted in their cosmology, many Bulgarian participants treat healing as the main goal, often shaped by prior New Age experiences. As these rituals are transplanted into Europe, their meanings evolve, leading to hybrid forms and tensions around authenticity and appropriation. The ceremonies are increasingly commercialized, adapted by both indigenous and non-indigenous facilitators to meet the expectations of a growing spiritual consumer base. This evolving landscape underscores the fluid nature of ritual healing in a globalized world, challenging fixed notions of tradition and highlighting the ongoing transformation of indigenous practices in new cultural contexts.

Visual Materials



Fig. 1. Portative altar on a chair, situated in a room, because it's too cold outside. Image courtesy of the author.

Fig. 2. Huichol's handmade amulet and handmade coverlet above the chair altar. Image courtesy of the author.



Fig. 3. Specially arranged construction of sacred objects – mini altar on the room's floor, representing the four directions of the world. Image courtesy of the author.

Fig. 4. Victor takes the cross as a present from his new Christian friend – the shepherd from the village, "bai" M. (the men with the white hair). Image courtesy of the author.